

The Evangelicals and the Great Trump Hope

nytimes.com/2016/07/11/opinion/campaign-stops/the-evangelicals-and-the-great-trump-hope.html

By ROBERT P. JONES

July 11, 2016



A recent carefully choreographed meeting between Mr. Trump and evangelical leaders provided a window into the ways many are trying to square this circle. Most notably, James C. Dobson, the founder and former director of Focus on the Family — who remains an influential figure in conservative Christian circles — claimed that he had secondhand knowledge that Mr. Trump had recently come “to accept a relationship with Christ” and that Mr. Trump should be “cut some slack” as “a baby Christian.”

The former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, an ordained Baptist minister whose daughter, Sarah, is a senior adviser to Mr. Trump, checked the “family values” box by testifying to Mr. Trump’s closeness to his adult children. Mr. Huckabee described their relationship as “one of the most admirable I’ve ever seen from any father with children.”

But while Mr. Dobson and Mr. Huckabee strive to help evangelicals justify their default support of the Republican candidate, the Rev. Robert Jeffress, the influential senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and a prominent member of Mr. Trump’s evangelical advisory committee, provided a more utilitarian motive for backing Mr. Trump for president. Rather than

trying to defend Mr. Trump's Christian credentials, Mr. Jeffress bluntly said that in the face of perceived threats facing evangelicals, "I want the meanest, toughest, son-of-a-you-know-what I can find in that role, and I think that's where many evangelicals are."

Mr. Jeffress's expression of acute vulnerability is key to understanding white evangelical support for Mr. Trump and the extraordinary lengths to which evangelical leaders are going so they can rally behind him. Leaders like Mr. Jeffress locate the threats to their security in the larger world around them.

But the anger, anxiety and insecurity many contemporary white evangelicals feel are better understood as a response to an internal identity crisis precipitated by the recent demise of "white Christian America," the cultural and institutional world built primarily by white Protestants that dominated American culture until the last decade.

Today, white evangelicals are not only experiencing the shrinking of their own ranks, but they are also confronting larger, genuinely new demographic and cultural realities. When Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, white Christians (Catholics and Protestants) constituted a majority (54 percent) of the country; today, that number has slipped to 45 percent. Over this same period, support for gay marriage — a key issue for evangelicals — moved from only four in 10 to solid majority territory, and the Supreme Court cleared the way for gay and lesbian couples to marry in all 50 states. The Supreme Court itself symbolized these changes, losing its last remaining Protestant justice, John Paul Stevens, in 2010.

A recent Public Religion Research Institute-Brookings survey shows the alarm that white evangelical Protestants are feeling in the wake of demographic and cultural changes. Nearly two-thirds are bothered when they encounter immigrants who speak little English. More than two-thirds believe that discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against other groups. For discrimination against Christians, that number is nearly eight in 10. And perhaps most telling of all, seven in 10 white evangelical Protestants say the country has changed for the worse since the 1950s.

By most measures, Ted Cruz, the son of an evangelical pastor and himself a Southern Baptist, should have been the evangelicals' presidential candidate in 2016. But Mr. Trump won evangelicals over by explicitly addressing their deeper sense of loss. Mr. Cruz assured evangelicals that he'd secure them exemptions from the new realities, while Mr. Trump promised to reinstate their central place in the country. Mr. Cruz offered to negotiate a respectable retreat strategy, while Mr. Trump vowed to turn back the clock.

For white evangelical Protestants, Mr. Trump's general vow to "make America great again" means something specific. Mr. Trump stepped into the spotlight just as the curtain was coming down on the era of white Protestant dominance.

Mr. Trump's ascendancy has turned the 2016 election into a referendum on the death of white Christian America, with the candidate appealing strongly to those who are most grieving this loss. Mr. Trump instinctively understood this from the beginning of his campaign. Take his speech at an evangelical college before the Iowa caucuses in January: "I'll tell you one thing: I

get elected president, we're going to be saying 'Merry Christmas' again." He added that Christianity will be resurgent "because if I'm there, you're going to have plenty of power — you don't need anybody else."

How white evangelicals respond will be important for the future of the American democratic experiment. If their powerful feelings of nostalgia and vulnerability lead them to embrace Mr. Trump as a straightforward means back to power, we can expect, if he wins, more lawsuits and civic unrest, accompanied by more politicized churches and increasing political polarization along cultural and racial lines.

If, however, white evangelicals somehow summon a response that is rooted in real acceptance of their decentered place in a new America, they may find that they have a critical role to play in the revitalization of our civic life.